DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 564 CS 013 292

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TITLE Semantics and Syntax: Context Clues in Reading for Young Children.
PUB DATE 1998-10-08
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Context Clues; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; English Instruction; Reading Difficulties; Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; *Reading Research; *Reading Skills; *Semantics; *Syntax; Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to bring information to a broad audience on children's utilization of semantic and syntax context clues in reading. It reviews the research of several contemporary theorists who indicate that semantics and syntax are overlapping processes. The simultaneous use of these processes enable young, particularly struggling readers to compensate for problem-words and difficult language in semantically and syntactically inaccessible texts. English Language Learners' ability to construct meaning from texts written with English vocabulary and sentence structure is also discussed. Finally, the question of how to link theory to practice is raised, and more semantically and syntactically accessible research literature is recommended to aid in this endeavor. (Contains 7 references.) (Author)

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ED 424 564

Running Head: Semantics and Syntax: Context Clues

# Semantics and Syntax: Context Clues in Reading for Young Children

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October 8, 1998

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring information to a broad audience on children's utilization of semantic and syntactic context clues in reading. It reviews the research of several contemporary theorists who indicate that semantics and syntax are overlapping processes. The simultaneous use of these processes enable young, particularly struggling readers to compensate for problem-words and difficult language in semantically and syntactically inaccessible texts. English Language Learners' ability to construct meaning from texts written with English vocabulary and sentence structure is also discussed. Finally, the question of how to link theory to practice is raised, and more semantically and syntactically accessible research literature is recommended to aid in this endeavor.

## Introduction

This paper discusses the role in youngsters' reading of semantic and syntactic context clues. These clues are proven to be heavily relied upon for word anticipation and comprehension by developing readers, particularly those struggling with fluency. Consideration of context is also particularly important in making texts more accessible to young readers; texts that account for readers' cognitive and linguistic experiences and those written by peers are more accessible to young readers than basal readers.

## Research

### Semantics and Syntax as Overlapping Processes

While they are often presented as discrete entities for heuristic purposes, syntax and semantics, according to Ekwall and Shanker (1985) often overlap. The simultaneous use of semantic and syntactic processes enable readers to decode the meaning of a word according to how it is used in a sentence, or anticipate a word likely to follow based on language patterns or the way words are strung together. Readers combined use of semantic and syntactic contextual information expedites word recognition as compared to the use of syntactic information alone.

### Fluent and Non-Fluent Readers

Schwantes (1991) in his study using third grade, sixth grade, and college age students treats semantics and syntax as overlapping processes. The bottom-up model, Schwantes writes, views lower level processes, such as word recognition, as a foundation

on which to build higher level processes. Contrarily, the top-down model says that it is through operating higher level processes that readers develop lower level processes. While he outlines and never discounts the validity of bottom-up and top-down models of reading, he uses for his theoretical framework the interactive model. This model dictates that meaning is not constructed through use of higher level processes if lower level processes are not yet developed. Meaning is only constructed if both higher and lower level processes interact. Young readers, Schwantes finds, rely heavily on semantic and syntactic information for word level analysis, compared to his adult subjects who tend to use these context clues at the level of meaning integration. Schwantes hypothesizes that during different phases of development of reading fluency, readers attend to different processing levels.

Similarly, Henshaw (1992) asserts that context clue application differs depending on developmental reading stage. Like Schwantes, Henshaw finds that young readers rely heavily on semantic and syntactic input to read *successfully*. She specifically examines readers with poor reading fluency, and through a positivist lens ascertains that her low level subjects utilize context clues as a compensatory device. These readers tend to use context clues more heavily than fluent readers. Her study calls for eleven year-old remedial readers to read three texts gradually decreasing in accessibility termed self, peer, and class. The self texts were individually drafted for each child based on his or her oral language experience and personal interests. Peer texts consisted of the other subjects' self texts, and class texts were excerpts from basal readers.

As texts became less accessible, readers relied on context clues to compensate for the difficulty in language. Such clues facilitate solving problem-words if these words

occur later in the sentence or are less isolated from familiar grammatical context. If a problem-word occurs late in a sentence, the reader has more context from which to draw upon to decode the difficult word. Ekwall and Shanker comment on the greater accessibility of peer-written texts verses class texts when they write that second graders, for instance, more easily read peer-written texts than those written by adults who use comparable words and sentence lengths. Adults cannot master second graders' syntax, and ironically, it is their sophisticated sentence style that hinders their ability to compose syntactically optimal texts for second graders to read. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide syntactically appropriate material authored by peers for their students to read.

When young readers read a word in a relevant, accessible text, they will often miss the same word in a less accessible text. A flexible reader is able to recognize a word in multiple contexts. At times, Henshaw's readers show lack of flexibility as they read words correctly when they are situated in an accessible text, and incorrectly in texts that are less so. However, the heavy utilization of semantic and syntactic context clues indicates that poor readers should not be underestimated for their ability to read for meaning. Henshaw asserts that reading for meaning does not need to be taught. Moreover, the article implies that reading for meaning is an intrinsic characteristic in all readers.

English Language Learners

Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) discuss the effects of semantics and syntactic clues for English Language Learners (ELLs). They juxtapose contemporary dueling

hypotheses: the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH) and the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH). The theorists analyze differences in ELL subject performance on literal verses inferential reading comprehension questions based on vocabulary or semantics, and sentence structure or syntax. Interpretation of the study's results depends upon one's stance in the LTH verses LIH debate. LTH subscribers would attempt to remedy misinterpretation of reading questions posed in English with direct instruction in metalinguistics and English grammar and language. Promoters of LIH may blame something as subtle as nuance for readers' misinterpretation of semantic input, because L2 reading performance is viewed as greatly shared, transferable and intertwined with L1 reading ability. The two are thought to emanate from the same core. Perhaps the transferability is linked to the relatedness of the L1 and L2. Roberts (1958) reports that there exist hundreds of language families which can differ markedly in terms of semantics, syntax, and other features such as the Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European. This subject and the debate surrounding it, as well as the questions and findings previously discussed, have profound implications for the multi-literate California schools.

## Applying Theory to Practice

This discussion of the research on young readers' utilization of semantic and syntactic context clues leads to questions regarding the application of theory to classroom practice. It is advised by Barnitz (1997) that reading teachers let their metacognition and awareness of linguistic diversity guide their approach, and directly but not in an isolated fashion, provide tools for reading students to aid their processing of semantic and syntactic input. Barnitz suggests sentence manipulation, sentence combining, and

sentence expanding to help students construct and understand meaning from syntactic input. Strategies for new vocabulary, Barnitz writes, include semantic feature analysis and semantic mapping.

## Conclusion

The critical importance of young readers' utilization of semantic and syntactic context clues has been demonstrated by each study. Schwantes' study, based on an interactive model, shows how young, developing readers depend on semantic and syntactic information for word analysis more than adults, while Henshaw (1992) refines the comparative analysis and considers poor verses fluent readers' context clue reliance. She presents this heavy utilization as an expertise in struggling readers. Therefore, she requests that research on remedial readers' context-clue dependency be directed toward the goal of increasing knowledge about successful reading rather than focused on error. After all, the overarching goal is to produce successful readers in schools, so concentrating on how to bring that about will in turn do so. Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) and Roberts (1958) discuss semantic and syntactic similarities and differences in languages and their effects on ELLs' reading fluency and comprehension. Finally, Barnitz (1997) recommends specific, concrete teaching strategies that apply theory to classroom practice.

## Implications

Barnitz's article offers suggestions for Berhardt and Kamil's conundrum and writes that while similarities exist across languages, teachers should become linguistically

aware of the semantic and syntactic features of students' L1 so that they can distinguish between valid dialectal responses to reading material and reading problems. The dangling question for teachers, linguists, and researchers is: should metalinguistics and context clue related strategies be directly employed in the reading classroom especially in linguistically diverse milieus?

In order to begin to answer the questions that surround these issues, further research must be conducted that specifically examines how these authors' theories can be effectively applied in the classroom. In other words, theory must meet practice. Knowledge and pedagogical improvements cannot be gained if theory and practice remain in separate realms and do not interlock. While there exist movements afoot to apply theory to practice, the realms are kept discrete by the semantic and syntactic inaccessibility of research reports and articles. The situation for teachers who struggle to construct meaning from these texts is analogous to that of the subjects they analyze: readers who rely heavily on semantic and syntactic context clues to decipher difficult written language. This paper attempts to reach a broader audience so that the valuable information it synthesizes can instigate positive change in literacy instruction.

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